

The New York Times

Silencing the Fanatics

BY ADAM GOODHEART December 2, 2010

Boston, Dec. 3, 1860

“Treason! Treason! Police! Police!”

A tangled mass of struggling men surged around the stage. Fine mahogany walking sticks became weapons; top hats and silk gloves were trampled underfoot. A flung chair crashed to pieces against the floor. In the midst of it all a tall, well-built, determined-looking man was making his way toward the podium through the melee, parrying blows left and right – fighting, a newspaper would report, “like a trained pugilist.” Frederick Douglass was not going to let anyone keep him from speaking. Twenty years earlier, as a teenager kept [in slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland](#), he had struck back with his fists against the most feared white man in the county, a “slave breaker” who had been tasked with destroying the youth’s irrepressible spirit. Now – as a free person, an internationally renowned orator and one of America’s most fearless abolitionists – he would not yield even to a room full of white men. Not even if they included some of the wealthiest and most powerful figures in the state of Massachusetts. And especially not on this day, of all days.



Library of Congress "Expulsion of Negroes and Abolitionists from the Tremont Temple, Boston, Massachusetts, on December 3, 1860," from Harper's Weekly.

For today, abolitionists had gathered to mark the first anniversary of [the awful morning](#) when John Brown's body was cut down from the gallows in Virginia, to be lowered into a martyr's grave. (The exact date, Dec. 2, had fallen this year on a Sunday.) They were determined to honor the brave old man not by pronouncing empty eulogies but by gathering, in the words of the official invitation, "to consider the Great Question of the Age, 'How Can American Slavery Be Abolished?'"

But in these closing weeks of 1860, the Great Question of the Age had become a more dangerous topic than ever. A year before, Brown had seemed to most Americans like a lone madman with a few deluded acolytes, his incursion into

slaveholding Virginia as improbable as if a band of vengeful Apaches had galloped across Boston Common. But now armies were forming in the American heartland, and talk of invasions and counter-invasions could be heard on every village green. Brown's inept feat of military amateurism now seemed like a knife-thrust into the very heart of the Republic. Millions of Northerners and Southerners agreed: these abolitionist fanatics must be silenced, for the greater good of the nation. "The right of free speech, like every other right, may be abused and turned into licentiousness," declared the editors of the New York Herald. "The harangues of the abolition crusaders have brought the Union to the verge of dissolution, and vast multitudes of the population to poverty and starvation."

On Dec. 3, for the Brown commemoration, black and white antislavery activists filed into Tremont Temple, a stone's throw from Boston Common, where Revolutionary War minutemen had once drilled. But they were joined – indeed, quickly outnumbered – by throngs of Bostonians who had come with no intention of genuflecting before the patron saint of abolition. In New England, grown rich on the profits of its textile mills, all sorts of people were anxious to stave off conflict with the cotton-growing states. A newspaper described these interlopers as "a diversified mob, composed chiefly of North End roughs and Beacon street aristocrats"; another observer noted many Harvard students among them. They described themselves, in prouder terms, as "Unionists," and they had come to shut down the abolitionists' gathering – with the help of the Boston police, if necessary.

The first speaker on the official program, a white antislavery writer, was jeered and heckled until finally, unable to stand any more, he rushed offstage to seize the most obnoxious of

his harassers by the coat collar and try to drag him out of the hall. A young black clergyman quickly took his place, to be drowned out in turn amid a storm of hisses, foot-stomping, and racial epithets.

The scene soon devolved into pandemonium. There were three cheers for Frederick Douglass from one corner of the hall; three cheers for South Carolina from another. People began picking up their chairs and hurling them onto the stage in a great heap. A Unionist man grabbed the struggling Douglass by the hair; an abolitionist woman cried out for someone to start cutting the hecklers' throats. Pale, thin Franklin Sanborn, one of Brown's financial backers, stood wringing his hands and protesting, "This is not the Boston I have known." Policemen began filling the doorways. A dutiful newspaper reporter's attempt to record the proceedings reads like a piece of Brechtian theater:

Voice – Where's the Union?

Sanborn – We come to discuss the subject of American slavery.

Voice – Where's John Brown?

Voice – He's safe.

Another voice – The devil has him.

Voice from the Platform – No matter where he may be.

Sanborn – Every man is entitled to express his own opinion.

Cries – No! No! (Three cheers.)

Sanborn – Cannot every man say what he thinks at stated times and in proper places?

Cries – Yes! Yes! (Great noise.)

And a few minutes later:

Negro voices – We object. It is not right. It is not right.

Only Douglass, with his practiced and powerful bass voice,

managed to make himself heard for more than a few moments above the din. He reached the podium and, defying the terrible threats of the crowd – *Put him out! Down him! Put a rope round his neck!* – shouted:

This is one of the most impudent, (*order! order!*) barefaced, (*knock him down! sit down!*) outrageous attacks on free speech (*stop him! you shall hear him!*) – I can make myself heard – (*great confusion*) that I have ever witnessed in Boston or elsewhere. (*Applause. Free speech.*) I know your masters. (*Cries – Treason! treason! Police! police! Put him out! put him out!*) I have served the same master that you are serving. (*Time! Time!*) You are serving the slaveholders.

At last, Douglass stepped down and the police converged on the speakers' platform. They had orders from the mayor himself: the meeting was at an end. After a few more desultory scimmages in which a young lady and two distinguished ministers were manhandled by the officers, the hall stood empty and padlocked, lest it be the scene of further outrages against the peace of Boston – or the peace of America.

That evening, the abolitionists reassembled in a less conspicuous venue, a small black Baptist church. Douglass was at last able to deliver his carefully prepared oration from the Brown tribute. But they would reemerge to find another Unionist mob awaiting them; this time, several African Americans were badly beaten. A few nights later, Douglass – remaining in the city and defying intimidation – gave an even more eloquent address on a subject of new urgency: freedom of speech. “Boston is a great city,” he began. “No where more than here have the principles of human freedom been expounded.” He continued:

And yet, even here, in Boston, the moral atmosphere is dark and heavy. The principles of human liberty, even if correctly apprehended, find but limited support in this hour of trial. The world moves slowly, and Boston is much like the world. We thought the principle of free speech was an accomplished fact. Here, if no where else, we thought the right of the people to assemble and express their opinion was secure. ... But here we are to-day contending for what we thought was gained years ago. The mortifying and disgraceful fact stares us in the face, that though Faneuil Hall and Bunker Hill Monument *stand*, freedom of speech is struck down.

Sources: John W. Blassingame, ed., "The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews," Vol. 3, 1855-63; William S. McFeely, "[Frederick Douglass](#)"; Philip S. Foner, "The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass," Vol. 2; New York Tribune, Dec. 4, 1860; New York Herald, Dec. 4, 5 and 26, 1860; The Liberator, Dec. 14, 1860; John R. McKivigan, ed., "The Reminiscences of William Wild Thayer, Boston Publisher and Abolitionist" (Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1991). Italics have been added to some of the original sources for the sake of clarity.